

Dear Clergy, Lay Readers, Vestry Secretaries and Diocesan Secretaries

You will be aware of the changes announced by Nicola Sturgeon on Saturday evening regarding the regulations on social gathering over the festive season and the new restrictions to be imposed from Boxing Day. Further details regarding the Government announcement are available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-festive-period/>

Many will be experiencing deep disappointment as a result and the Primus issued a message to the church on Saturday evening which, if you have not already seen it, can be viewed at: <https://www.scotland.anglican.org/message-from-the-primus-on-christmas-restrictions/>

Whilst being a major disappointment to many, the restriction of the "festive bubble" permission from five days to just one does not affect guidance which the Advisory Group has previously issued regarding Christmas services etc. However, of greater impact for churches is the announcement that the whole of the Scottish mainland from and including Boxing Day and for the following 3 weeks, is to go into level 4, the highest level of lockdown restrictions in the Government's Strategic framework. Specific implications of this for churches are as follows: –

1. In level 4, the maximum number of people allowed to attend a physical church service is reduced from 50 to 20 (the restrictions on physical distancing, of course, continue to apply so if physical distancing means only a lesser number can be accommodated, then it is that lesser number which applies). Children need to be included in those numbers – there is no exemption for them. Similarly it includes those enabling the service to happen such as welcomers, sidespeople etc.
2. In level 4 it is not permissible to cross a local authority boundary to attend one's normal place of worship. That will mean that congregational members who have previously been accustomed to doing that will no longer be able to do so.
3. For clergy or church workers, in level 4 it is permissible to visit the vulnerable but pastoral visits of other sorts should be conducted in a non-physical way.
4. For churches which might previously have been undertaking work with children under the Government's guidance for Organised Unregulated Activities with children, no indoor work is permissible in level 4.
5. It remains permissible in level 4 to attend a place of worship to broadcast worship or record it for streaming.

Certain parts of the country have already experienced level 4 restrictions and the Advisory Group is aware that for some, the higher level of restrictions entailed in level 4 has already meant that a decision to discontinue worship for a period has been taken. That may now become an issue for other churches to consider. The Advisory Group reiterates what it said on the subject in a previous update as follows: *We are aware that some churches, which had previously reopened for public worship, have decided for the time being to discontinue doing so, for a number of practical reasons – for example, if those who might attend, or assist, at worship in a supporting role, would otherwise require to cross a level 4 [local authority] boundary, or because, with limited numbers of volunteers, people simply need a break. As the College of Bishops reminded the Church a number of weeks ago, this is a time to be kind*

*to oneself and gentle with another. The decision to discontinue public worship, or to resume it again in the future, is one to be taken locally. The Bishops have indicated that, where a church previously reopened for public worship and was approved to do so, it is not necessary for the church to seek approval again from the Diocesan Bishop to reopen for a second time. However, when a congregation decides to discontinue public worship for the time being, or to resume it again later, the Diocesan Bishop should be notified of that fact and the advice set out in section C of the Phase 3 guidance about addressing preliminary matters prior to resumption of public worship should be observed.*

Despite all the above, this comes with warmest wishes for the remainder of Advent and, in due time, Christmas.

Kind regards

Donald Walker  
Director of Communications  
Scottish Episcopal Church  
07736 042 850